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SCHAKOWSKY DEMANDS ANSWERS FROM ADMINISTRATION ON AIR INTERDICTION POLICY IN ANDEAN REGION AND USE OF PRIVATE MILITARY FIRMS

WASHINGTON, D.C. -U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), author of the Andean Region Contractor Accountability Act (ARCAA), H.R. 1591, today demanded answers once again from Administration officials on the role of federally-funded private soldiers in Latin America. ARCAA would prohibit the federal government from funding private armies in the Andean region.

Schakowsky questioned officials during a hearing of the Government Reform Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources on U.S. air interdiction policies in the Andean Region that resulted in the murder of an American missionary and her daughter. Information provided to the Peruvian government by CIA contractors resulted in the shooting of a plane carrying American missionaries and the death of Roni and Charity Bowers.

Below is Schakowsky's statement:

"Mr. Chairman, I am pleased that the Subcommittee has convened today to hear testimony on the U.S. policy of intelligence sharing and participation in air interdiction operations in South America. I am sorry that it has taken the loss of two innocent U.S. civilians and possibly others to raise the visibility of this questionable policy."

"In March, when this Subcommittee heard testimony on U.S. policy toward Colombia, I raised several concerns about the use of private contractors by the U.S. in the Andean region. I said, 'The privatization of our military and police assistance raises important oversight questions as we get drawn deeper into Colombia's civil war. The most obvious question is why do we need to outsource and privatize our efforts?' The American taxpayers already pay \$300 billion per year to fund the world's most powerful military. Why should they have to pay a second time in order to privatize our operations? Are we outsourcing to in order avoid public scrutiny, controversy or embarrassment? Is it to hide body bags from the media and thus shield them from public opinion? Or is it to provide deniability because these private contractors are not covered by the same rules as active duty US service persons..? How is the public to know what their tax dollars are being used for? If there is a potential for a privatized Gulf of Tonkin incident, then the American people deserve to have a full and open debate before this policy goes any farther."

"Since then, I have introduced H.R. 1591, legislation that would prohibit U.S. funds from being used to contract with private military companies in the Andean region. The U.S. taxpayers are unwittingly funding a private war with private soldiers. This is a "shoot first and ask question later" policy encouraged by the U.S. in its war on drugs."

"Shooting down unarmed civilian aircraft-even those thought to be carrying drugs-is contrary to fundamental U.S. law enforcement policy. I don't think that any of my colleagues would support U.S. law enforcement officials in this country shooting down planes or blowing up vans based simply on the suspicion or even the conviction that drugs are present. We believe in due process which should be no less respected in the other countries than it is in our own. The kind of action we saw in Peru last week, amounts to an extra-judicial killing and we in this country now have innocent blood on our hands because of it.

"Those are the facts and they were proven on April 20th., the day the actions of CIA contractors resulted in the deaths of Veronica and Charity Bowers. This is what the American public is reading about this failed policy."

The Miami Herald, April 25th

"Peru's Air Force, with U.S. assistance, committed an unforgivable error. In the wake of last week's shooting, the Bush Administration should reconsider the merits of the interdiction effort."

Chicago Tribune, April 24th

"Given U.S.-led counternarcotics strategy in the region since 1994..this kind of tragedy was bound to happen. Wherever the culpability lies in this incident, the larger issue is whether the U.S. strategy to use military interdiction in Peru, Colombia, and other Andean nations-while demand for cocaine still flourishes in America-amounts to a fool's errand. The Peru incident should set off alarms in the Bush Administration about what could happen in Colombia as the U.S. becomes more involved. This is an opportunity to rethink the whole strategy."

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, April 25th- "Deaths in Peru Symbolize Danger, Futility of Drug War"

"The Bush Administration acted quickly to freeze anti-drug surveillance flights in Peru. but President Bush should have taken the opportunity to ask for a broad review of the longtime Washington policy of assisting drug interdiction in foreign countries. Can anyone point to data that shows that shooting down planes over Peru has done anything to stop even one addict in this country from using drugs?. This is a war we cannot win."

Chicago Sun-Times, April 24th "Only Losers in the War That We Can't Win"

"The Bowers are just one recent example of how the U.S. war on drugs, as virtuous as its intent may be, has had consequences serious enough to call into question our ineffective approach to America's appetite for illegal substances."

"We are here today to re-evaluate our policy, to try to pick up the pieces and move on. I know some of those with us today just want to put this tragedy behind us and get back to the business of the drug war."

"However, there are so many questionable aspects of our policy and so many unanswered questions. Why do we have to hire private contractors to do our work in Andean countries? How much of the public's money has been spent to hire what some have referred to as mercenaries? Where is the accountability? Who exactly are they? DO they even speak Spanish? From what I do know, outsourcing in the Andean region is a way to avoid congressional oversight and public scrutiny. The use of private military contractors risks drawing the U.S. into regional conflicts and civil war. It's clear to me that this practice must stop."

"I realize there are those who are willing to accept the risk of another incident like this one, but I am not."

"We have spent billions of taxpayer dollars, employed personnel from numerous agencies and around the world, and drugs continue to flow into the U.S. at untold rates. The Bowers and others are an undeniable symbol of the disaster that has become of our anti-drug efforts."

"We need a new approach. I agree with the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense that our strategy needs include more emphasis for treatment and prevention. The Administration should rethink its budget request for the Andean region. But immediately, we should go beyond the suspension of surveillance flights in Peru and suspend all U.S. contracts with private military firms in the Andean region. The audio and videotapes and any other materials related to this and other shootdowns in the Andean region should also be shared with the Congress and the public."

"Finally, the Bush Administration's proposed nomination of John Walters as the next Drug Czar raises troubling implications for the future of this tragic policy. An outspoken advocate of the shutdown policy, he has even been criticized by General Barry McCaffrey on Meet the Press for being "too focused on interdiction"."

"I want to thank and welcome our distinguished witnesses for being here today and look forward to their testimony."